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AUTHOR Day, Elaine M.
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ABSTRACT

British Columbia's first cohort of 58 students to complete their schooling in French immersion graduated from secondary school in June 1985. A survey used student attitude and opinion scales to assess the graduates' attitudes toward various aspects of French language and culture and their self-perceptions of their knowledge of French. A student intentions questionnaire was used to gather student background information, opinions on the immersion experience, and plans for the future. The results suggest that the students leave the program with positive attitudes toward many aspects of the French language and culture and a keen awareness of the benefits of having studied in French immersion. The findings show that they use their French language skills outside of school in many different ways, largely for communicative purposes rather than for passive enjoyment, and plan to use it in many and diverse ways in the future. (MSE)

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A Study of the Attitudes and Opinions
of British Columbia's First Immersion Graduates

Elaine M. Day
Research Associate, B.C. French Study, Fac. Education
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia

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Introduction

In June, 1985, the first students to have completed their schooling in French immersion graduated from secondary school in two school districts in British Columbia. As they were the province's first immersion graduates, studies were undertaken to determine the students' attitudes toward French language and culture, their self-perceptions of their knowledge of French, their opinions of the program, and their plans for the future. The studies were conducted by the B.C. French Study research team, Simon Fraser University, at the request of the school districts, who sought information on how the program has worked, ways it could be improved, and how students planned to use their French after graduation. This article highlights the major findings of the studies, which were conducted in the spring of the students' final year in secondary school (i.e., grade 12).

All students were administered a) the Student Attitude and Opinions Scales (Kaufman, Shapson, and Day, 1978), which were designed to assess student attitudes toward various aspects of French language and culture and their self-perceptions of their knowledge of French; and b) the Student Intentions Questionnaire, which was developed by the research team to gather background information from the students and to determine their opinions on their immersion experience and their plans for the future. All students enrolled in the grade 12 secondary immersion program in one district (100%, 21/21), and approximately two-thirds of the students in the other district (65%, 24/37) completed the instruments.¹ Nearly three-fourths of the students in the former district (71%, 15/21) had completed an early immersion program in elementary school, while over one-half in the latter district (58%, 14/24) had completed a late immersion program.² The percentage of females in both groups was very high (67%, 14/21 and 92%, 22/24).

Student Attitudes and Opinions

The results assessing student attitudes toward various aspects of French language and culture indicated that the attitudes of the students in both districts were generally quite positive. Students were most positive in their attitudes towards bilingualism and their motivation to learn French. They also displayed positive attitudes toward French-speaking Canadians and rated their understanding of French-Canadian culture and their feeling of comfort in using French quite highly. In addition, students in both districts gave quite high self-ratings (between "fairly well" and "fluently") to their ability to read, write, and speak and understand French. Previous research studies conducted on Canadian immersion programs in the earlier grades have demonstrated that immersion students hold favorable attitudes toward many aspects of French language and culture and positive self-perceptions of their knowledge of French (see, for example, Genesee, 1978; Shapson and Day, 1982; Swain and Lapkin, 1982). The findings of the two studies in British Columbia indicate that students have a similar set of attitudes at the end of their immersion experience.

Student Use of French Outside of School

In order to gain information on their experiences in French outside of school, students were asked whether they had participated in an exchange program, gone to French camp, or travelled to a French-speaking area. The results indicated that the great majority of students (84%, 38/45) had participated in an exchange program with French-speaking people. In addition, nearly two-thirds of the students (62%, 28/45) had travelled to a French-speaking area (not part of an exchange), and over two-fifths (44%, 20/45) had attended French camp.

When students were asked to comment on the opportunities they had had to

use their French outside of school, only a small number of students (5) said that they rarely or never used their French outside of school. Most of the students described a variety of opportunities they had had for using their French. They most frequently mentioned using French when travelling or on exchange programs (24/72) and speaking French in their communities (18/72) or in their jobs (12/72). In addition, they mentioned watching French T.V. or films and listening to French radio or music, writing letters in French, speaking French with Francophone relatives, and reading. The following selection of student comments illustrates the many ways students have used their French outside of school.

During exchanges....with customers at work (not very frequently). Potential opportunity for this summer if hired as a French Immersion Day Camp Counsellor.... Helping out at sports day at a programme-cadre school.

When speaking, during the summer to French tourists, friends etc. People who speak French on busses, I am not embarrassed to say hello.

At work customers who speak French often come in so I can explain things to them and hopefully put them at ease. If there is a good show on T.V. or the radio, I can listen to it even if it is in French.

French is almost an international language, and I found while travelling through Greece and Germany that if there is any trouble in communication, French was used. Also spontaneous use comes in handy in different situations, etc. Upon meeting French people it obviously comes in handy.

Student Opinions of the Program

In the secondary immersion (grades 8-12) program, students in both districts had followed a generally similar program of studies in French. Social studies, French, and Communications were the subjects offered in French in the junior secondary grades (i.e., grade 8 to grade 9 or 10), followed by social studies and French in grade 11, and French only in grade 12. When asked whether they would have preferred to have taken some of their French

subjects in English, over one-third of the students (38%, 17/45) responded that they would have preferred social studies in English, with most of these students (12) saying that they felt that the French social studies curriculum was too limited and/or that they had not learned as much in the French as they would have in the English social studies program. The following sample of comments illustrates their feelings:

I believe that if I had taken social studies in English, I would have had a broader understanding of word history and geography instead of just French-Canadian history and geography.

I didn't feel I learned an adequate amount of material in comparison to the English social studies. Also we didn't follow the curriculum and therefore I felt much material was left out.

Although there was some student concern with receiving equivalent content in the French immersion as in the regular English social studies curriculum, students showed an equal if not greater concern with improving their French language skills during the secondary grades. Nearly two-thirds of the students (64%, 29/45) responded to the question asking them which subjects they felt should be taught in French in secondary school, and the subjects they mentioned most frequently were French language, literature, and culture (11); social studies, e.g., history, geography, western civilization, economics (10); communications, creative writing, or journalism (8); and art and drama (4). In the reasons they gave for their preferences, it was apparent that students were motivated by a strong desire to maintain and improve their French language skills, both oral and written, and in some cases, their knowledge and understanding of French-Canadians and their culture:

French, Communications. The course of Français itself should concentrate on grammar skills because there is much to learn, and Communications could put these skills to use with more emphasis on talking and listening rather than reading or writing.

History, geography, western civilization: Stresses the cultural aspects involved and makes one use the French language more.

Art or drama class. I feel this would be good because the students could speak French while doing something they want to do instead of only in academic courses.

Student responses to a question asking them their opinion on the number of courses offered in French in grades 11 and 12 (one district only) also reflected their desire to maintain and improve their proficiency in French. A large percentage of students (46%, 11/24) felt that the number of courses offered in French in these grades (i.e., two courses in grade 11 and one course in grade 12) was "about right", but over one-half (54%, 13/24) felt that this was "not enough". Some students responding "about right" felt that French might not be suitable for teaching many of the subjects offered in grades 11 and 12 or that they might be handicapped in some way:

If there were any fewer courses in French, we would forget too much. If there were any more, it would be a handicap towards the other studies.

Students who wanted more courses in French in grades 11 and 12 commented on the need to maintain and improve their French:

If a few more courses were offered in French, people's French would improve greatly. Because the number of courses in French in grades 11 and 12 diminishes, people's French becomes worse again because of lack of practice.

The preceding questions were designed to gain the students' opinions on the design of the immersion program with respect to subjects and time allotments in French. Students were also asked to give their opinions on the program generally and to suggest changes and improvements that might be made. Overall, student opinions of the secondary immersion program were quite positive. The great majority (80%, 35/44) indicated that they would recommend the secondary immersion program to other students, and only a small minority

(7%, 3/44) said that they would not. Nearly three-fourths of the students (71%, 32/45) provided suggestions for changes or improvements in the program. Over one-half of the suggestions in one district were related to the need for quality instruction and improvement in the organization and content of the curriculum, while over one-half in the other district called for more emphasis on language to improve grammar and oral language skills and a greater number and/or variety of courses. In a recent article on the views of graduates of bilingual programs in Ottawa, Bonyun (1985) reported that student suggestions for program improvement tended to cluster around the following areas: teaching, course selection, and the opportunity to use French, especially in speaking. The concerns of the immersion graduates in British Columbia appear to be quite similar to those of the bilingual program graduates in Ottawa.

Student Opinions on the Immersion Experience

In order to probe their feelings on the pros and cons of their immersion experience, students were asked how they felt they had benefitted and whether they felt they had missed out on anything by being in a French immersion program. Over one-half of the students (58%, 26/45) said that they did not feel they had missed out on anything by being in a French immersion program, but over a third (38%, 17/45) felt that they had missed out in some way. Five students (5) felt that they had missed out in the choice of electives, and four (4) mentioned social problems with schoolmates. The remaining comments centered around concern with social studies, harm to English language skills, decline of French language skills in secondary school, and regrets about the choice of secondary school.

If the immersion program had its drawbacks for some of the students, these appear to be far outweighed by the benefits students felt they had

received from the program. All students (45/45) commented on how they had benefitted from French immersion. They most frequently mentioned the opportunity to learn, and in particular to communicate in a second language (23/73), the advantages their knowledge of French had given and/or would give them in the job market and in travelling (20/73), and a variety of personal benefits (15/73), such as increased self-confidence, personal challenge, and the opportunity to receive a different kind of education and to meet new people and make new friends. In addition, students felt that they had gained greater awareness and understanding of French-speaking people and their culture and greater cognitive flexibility, an improved understanding of their own language, English, or insight into other languages.

Plans for the Future

The results of the question asking students their plans for the coming two years indicated that almost all the students (96%, 43/45) planned to pursue a post-secondary education. One-third of the students (33%, 15/45), mostly from the same district, were planning to go out of the province for all or part of their post-secondary education. However, despite their immersion experience, it is interesting that most of these students were planning to attend English-speaking (10) rather than bilingual (4) or Francophone (1) institutions.

As to their plans for using French within the next few years, only a few students (3) indicated that they did not plan to do anything in French. The remaining students planned to use their French in a variety of ways. The majority indicated that they planned to take French as a language course and/or take other subjects in French (62%, 28/45) and to use French in a job (69%, 31/45). Only a minority of the students (27%, 12/45), mainly from one district, planned to live in a French-speaking area.

Almost all the students (43/45) also indicated that they would use their French over the long term. When asked to comment on their use of French in the future, over one-half mentioned that they would use French in their jobs or career (62%, 28/45) and/or when travelling (53%, 24/45). Some students also mentioned taking courses at university (5), meeting and communicating with French-speaking people (4), and a variety of other uses, such as reading, speaking with relatives, or enjoyment (8).

Summary and Discussion

The results of the two studies of the first immersion graduates in British Columbia have enabled us to gain insights into the students' views on the program and their intentions for the future. Since the studies involve small numbers of students who have experienced the program in the initial stages of its implementation at the secondary level, it would be premature to generalize from the findings. However, the findings suggest that school districts might better accommodate the needs of immersion students by:

- a) offering more than two courses in French in grade 11 and more than one course in French in grade 12, but making some of these optional.

The majority of students (54%, 13/24) felt that the number of courses they had in French in grades 11 and 12 was "not enough"; but a large percentage (46%, 11/24) felt that this was "about right", suggesting that many but by no means all of the students would take more courses in French.

- b) offering courses such as the following in French: French language, literature, and culture; social studies (history, western civilization, economics); communications, creative writing or journalism; and art or drama.

Students felt that these courses would best help them maintain and improve their proficiency in French. There was little interest for courses in mathematics or the sciences to be taught in French.

- c) ensuring that the courses which are taught in French have equivalent content as the corresponding courses in English or if not, that students are informed of the course content and its rationale in order to avoid disappointment and misunderstanding.

Over one-third of the students (38%, 17/45) said that they would have preferred social studies to be taught in English instead of French, with most of these students (12) saying that they felt that the French social studies curriculum was too limited and/or that they had not learned as much in the French as they would have in the English social studies program. Recent revisions in the provincial social studies curriculum may alleviate the concerns students had with this subject area. However, when developing courses for the secondary immersion program, it would still be important to recognize that students appear to want equivalent content with English in their secondary immersion courses.

- d) providing quality instruction and programming and ample opportunity for students to develop their French language skills, both oral and written.

The majority of suggestions for improvement made by the secondary immersion graduates were related to these areas. Students also showed through comments to numerous questions in the questionnaire a strong interest in maintaining and improving their proficiency in French during the secondary grades.

In considering the above suggestions, however, the reader is asked to bear in mind that they reflect only the views of students who stayed in the program through grade 12. It would also be important to gather information from students who withdraw from the program during secondary school, for they might have a quite different set of opinions, especially with regard to subjects taught in French and the priority placed on French language development.

The information provided by the students on their future intentions also contains some clues as to what post-secondary institutions might expect in the future. The results suggest that the responsibility for the continuation of the students' educational experiences in French will rest largely with local

colleges and universities. Almost all the immersion graduates (96%, 43/45) are university or college-bound, and most (67%, 30/45) plan to stay in the province for their post-secondary education. The majority of students (62%, 28/45) plan to take French as a language course and/or take other subjects in French. Whether they will do so depends on many factors, among them the willingness of post-secondary institutions to adapt to their needs. Yet, in the previously mentioned study of bilingual program graduates in Ottawa (Bonyun, 1985), over 40% of the students who had taken courses in French at university described difficulties in obtaining a suitable French course. Post-secondary institutions will have to be flexible and innovative in meeting the needs of students who have had a different second language experience than the French second language (FSL) graduates whom they have been accustomed to receiving in the past (for a recent discussion of the issues, see *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 1985, volume 5). In addition, more active recruitment, innovative programming, and financial incentives may be necessary to encourage students to attend bilingual or Francophone institutions outside of their province. One-third of the immersion graduates (33%, 15/45) plan to go out of the province for all or part of their post-secondary education, but despite their immersion experience, only a small number (5 students) plan to attend bilingual or Francophone institutions.

Overall, the findings of the studies of British Columbia's first immersion graduates suggest that the students leave the program with positive attitudes toward many aspects of French language and culture and a keen awareness of the benefits of having studied French immersion. The results indicate that they have used their French outside of school in many different ways but largely for communicative purposes rather than for more passive enjoyment. The results also indicate that they plan to use their French in

many and diverse ways in the future. Although many of these can be quantified (e.g., work, travel, etc.), only the words of the students themselves can help us appreciate the qualitative impact of their unique educational experience:

I have gained a second language. I have met wonderful and special people in the program. I have had the opportunity to go through a different type of education and learning system.

It has been a challenge and has helped me to realize my own strengths and limitations as well as helping me to learn about my country's culture.

I have learned a second language that will help me when I travel or at work. Because it is an in-depth understanding and not a basic root of a language as with non-immersion students, my French will always remain with me when I need it.

I believe my French can be useful in studies, travel and communication. It will be especially significant to use when in a predominantly English-speaking country. I hope it will remain a personal benefit for communication-oral and written.

Language is a tool of culture, of communication, of creativity; I will use it to pursue all of these in whatever way comes up.

Footnotes

¹The lower return rate in one district was due to the difficulty of reaching students who were not enrolled in secondary immersion courses at the time of the administration of the instruments (i.e., spring semester).

²In British Columbia, the early immersion program begins in kindergarten and offers all instruction (100%) in French in kindergarten through grade 2, 80% in grade 3, and from 50% to 80% from grades 4 through 7.. The late immersion program is a two year program beginning in grade 6 and offering all instruction (100%) in French in grade 6 and from 60 to 90% in grade 7. In secondary school (grades 8-12), early and late immersion students are offered a follow-up program (secondary immersion), in which French is the language of instruction for approximately 40% to 50% of the instructional time.

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